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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BISHKEK 000833

SIPDIS

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/CEN (GEHRENBECK)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/27/2017
TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM KG
SUBJECT: TRAVELS TO BATKEN AND BEYOND

BISHKEK 00000833 001.3 OF 003

Classified By: Amb. Marie L. Yovanovitch, Reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: During a four-day trip to southern Kyrgyzstan, the Ambassador visited the remote Batken Oblast, which is almost completely surrounded by Tajikistan, on the edge of the Ferghana Valley. Batken has several Uzbek and Tajik enclaves located within its borders, and mining (mercury and antimony) and agriculture are the dominant sectors of the limited local economy. Local government officials, religious leaders, and civil society representatives complained that Batken is neglected by the central government, with few officials traveling to the region. They spoke of problems along the borders with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, including concerns that Tajiks are encroaching on Kyrgyz lands. The Ambassador heard how limited economic opportunities have forced many to migrate to Kazakhstan and Russia for employment, with their remittances supporting families left behind. Batken officials said that the lack of funding for irrigation repairs and poor water management hinders agricultural development in the oblast. In neighboring Osh Oblast, the governor expressed concern that many local officials are not prepared to manage their increased responsibilities under the government's decentralization measures. Also in Osh, the Ambassador turned the sluice gates to inaugurate a USAID-sponsored Water Users Association canal project. End Summary.

FOUR DAYS IN THE REMOTE SOUTH

¶2. (C) During a trip to Batken and Osh on June 18-21, Ambassador met with the border services and discussed regional problems with numerous government officials, Islamic leaders, local NGO representatives, and U.S. exchange program alumni. Ambassador laid a wreath at a memorial to honor border services soldiers who lost their lives defending the borders from insurgents. She also visited a mountainous village that received U.S. assistance following an earthquake

earlier this year, and she toured a boarding school renovated with funds raised by the American Chamber of Commerce in Bishkek. She ended the trip in Osh to attend ceremonies to kickoff the Women's Mentoring Program and celebrate the completion of a USAID Water Users Association canal project. The Ambassador was welcomed at every meeting with gratitude for her visit to the remote region, as most complained that few Kyrgyz government officials from Bishkek travel to Batken and that their Oblast has been neglected and forgotten.

BEWARE THE ENCROACHING TAJIKS

¶3. (C) Local officials and residents told the Ambassador that the porous and ill-defined borders with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan present numerous problems, including harassment by Uzbek border officials and the encroachment by Tajiks. The Ambassador visited the Khaydarken Border Guard base to discuss border security and observe radio equipment provided by EXBS in use. The base commander expressed his gratitude for the communications package, stating his confidence that the unit was now well-equipped to guard the borders from insurgents. However, government officials and civil society leaders complained of porous borders and increasing harassment and altercations between Kyrgyz citizens and Uzbek border guards and customs officials when crossing the Uzbek enclave of Sokh. The government hopes that by September the road to bypass the enclave will be completed, although it will add several hours to an already arduous trip from Batken to Osh. (Note: The Ambassador traveled around Sokh on this rudimentary road, which was still under construction in many areas. End note.) Many accused the Tajiks of buying up houses along the border areas not yet demarcated, allowing them to claim territory historically belonging to the Kyrgyz. A deputy governor warned that "in ten years, the Tajiks will

have taken control of half of our land!" Government officials encourage their citizens not to sell to the Tajiks, but with few economic opportunities, many local Kyrgyz have sold their houses and moved to Bishkek, Kazakhstan, or Russia in the pursuit of employment.

A DISAPPEARING POPULATION

¶4. (C) Concerns about the migration of Batken citizens to Kazakhstan and Russia were raised in every meeting with the Ambassador. Some officials claimed that as much as 70 per cent of the working age population had migrated in search of better economic opportunities. Local NGO representatives spoke about numerous cases of migrants returning infected with AIDS or addicted to drugs. The Ambassador heard several stories of youths who, upon completing their secondary education and possibly tradecraft training, departed immediately for Bishkek and beyond. Many students are known to pay bribes to receive diplomas from their local university while they live and work in foreign countries as labor migrants. The flow of remittances was evident, as many houses had been repaired or improved, and some officials mentioned anecdotal evidence of migrants returning to open stores and small businesses. One government official estimated that an average of over $100 is sent home monthly by each migrant worker. However, the flow of money has done little to jump-start the near-lifeless economy. Residents fear that more of the disappearing work force will decide to stay in Kazakhstan or Russia, apply for citizenship, and bring the rest of their families to join them, thus exponentially increasing the flow of migrants and decreasing the flow of remittances.

BETTER WATER USAGE ESSENTIAL TO BATKEN ECONOMY

¶5. (C) In order to improve the economy and slow the mass exodus of migrant workers, some officials believe that

expanding the canal system and irrigating more farmland may be the answer. Local citizens noted that Batken has numerous water sources but inefficient water management limits their beneficial capacity. A district official estimated that 20 per cent of the water flowing through the region is used by Batken farmers, while the Tajiks utilize the rest for irrigating their own crops. The poor state of the Batken canal system limits the amount of irrigated land available to farmers. Local government officials recognize the problem and proposed a project to build additional canals that would double the amount of irrigated land. However, funding of the project continues to be an obstacle.

CONCERNS ABOUT LOCAL CAPACITY

¶6. (C) During a meeting with the Ambassador, Osh Governor Jantoro Satybaldiyev inquired about alternative debt relief programs following the government's rejection earlier this year of the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative. Satybaldiyev asked whether another HIPC-style program to eliminate national debt could be offered to Kyrgyzstan. He claimed that the decision to reject HIPC was made by politicians instead of economists and hoped that the West could offer an alternative. Similar to concerns raised by Batken officials, the governor said that local government officials were unprepared to deal with recent budget reforms that will provide direct funding to local administrations through a "two-tier budget." He felt that administrative reforms are essential to the republic but had little faith in President Bakiyev's abilities to see them through. Satybaldiyev also added that not only Batken but the entire south has been abandoned by the central government and thanked the Ambassador for drawing attention to their region.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) The remoteness of Batken is compounded by bad roads, difficulties at the borders (and at enclave borders), and a lack of irrigation infrastructure. Desperation in the voices of Batken residents emphasizes the gravity of the economic situation and the necessity for the central government to redirect attention and financial assistance to the area. Until then, the limited economic opportunities will continue to drive many from the area abroad in search of employment, Tajik citizens will gain control of more Kyrgyz territory, and remittances will remain a lifeline for the oblast.
YOVANOVITCH